

## **Irish Traditional Music: Thoughts after a night in East Clare**

**Eddie Stack**



*A view of Ennistymon from the Falls*

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For those of us who grew up immersed in Clare music, we were always aware of a friendly rivalry between our two great ceili bands, The Tulla and The Kilfenora. Each had won several All Ireland Ceili Band Championships, and had huge followings, both in the county and far beyond. Every year they battled it out at the famous fleadh of the Fifties and Sixties, packed halls and were often on the radio. We were proud of them. The Tulla were based in East Clare and the Kilfenora in North Clare, but in our county, a few miles made the world of difference in musical styles, tunes and rhythm.



*The Tulla Ceili Band, 1952: Ennistymon's Martin Garrihy on drums + George Byrt on piano*

Both bands had musicians from my home town of Ennistymon, and a few musicians changed bands over the years. Though we were geographically closer to Kilfenora — and were part of their ancient diocese — we also had a proud East Clare connection. Our native poet Brian Merriman, who wrote the famed *Midnight Court*, had moved to Feakle some 200 years earlier. Art stands the test of time in Clare, and so Feakle and Ennistymon were bonded forever by him. Merriman was also a fiddler, so we played that card as well.



*Brian Merriman, poet + fiddler of Ennistymon & Feakle*

Almost like political alliances, there were Tulla supporters and Kilfenora supporters in the town, there were closet supporters and suspect supporters. There were torn loyalties, blood loyalties and each year the town awaited the outcome of the All Ireland Fleadh Ceili Championship like the winning score of a hurling final. This was back in the days before television, computers and texting, and our contact with the outside world was a public phone in the Square, a green kiosk with a rickety concrete slab floor and broken windows.



*Our line to the outside world*

I remember the Sunday evening of The All Ireland Fleadh one August when I was a boy. A staunch Kilfenora female supporter stood beside the kiosk smoking a cigarette and fumbling with rosary beads. She was waiting for ‘the call’. I was watching her from the door of our pub and every now and again my mother would appear and look down anxiously at the woman. My mother was smoking too, the tension was sizzling. A few men in pub were discussing drummers — Ennistymon men drummed for both bands.

The ringing phone echoed up the quiet square on that warm evening. The woman rushed into the box and you could hear her shouting “Hello?” above in Dublin. Then we heard her say, “Thanks be to Sweet Jesus and his blessed mother, I was prayin’ all day...”

My own mother announced to the bar,

“The Kilfenora won.”

The following year it was probably the Tulla. We were blessed with great music in Clare.



*The Tulla, Ennistymon Hall, 1/1/1962 (Martin Vaughan drums, Francie Donnellon + PJ Hayes fiddles) courtesy of Clare Co Library*

When bands played at the hall in Ennistymon, they drank in our bar and generally took a crate or two with them for the road home after the dance. One night The Leitrim Ceili band from Galway, anchored by accordion player Joe Burke, played in town. They had a great crowd, collected their crate of porter or beer for the road and headed home through the Burren. They were travelling in an old VW bus and somewhere near the Corkscrew Hill, they slowed down so an on coming vehicle could pass. It was the Kilfenora Ceili Band on their way home from a gig so they stopped and everyone got out. The bands had a chat, discussed the night and the crowds they played to, praised and raved dancers. Then another vehicle approached and slowed down. It was the Tulla, bringing home a few of the Ennistymon boys. So they stopped too, got out and there was great jollity. There was a full moon, and the musicians sat on the silver limestone wall, opened multiple bottles and had the crack. A most beautiful summer’s night, moon beaming down on the Burren and away in the distance, the twinkling light of Galway in another province. Then someone said,

“You know, since we all met, we might as well play a tune.”

And so it was. Music was played that would make the stones dance. A gift to the night and the moon, a gift to the land from where the tunes came.



*The Tulla, 1982 (including Martin Hayes, Andrew + Mary McNamara and Jim Corry)*

Last weekend was Kilfenora's big do, a celebration of one hundred years on the go. This past weekend, there was a small gathering in Feakle, East Clare in memory of PJ. Hayes, a founder and leader of the Tulla Ceili Band. I rambled over there on Sunday afternoon and can say there's many more than forty shades of green in East Clare. It was a beautiful sunny evening and nature was alive after rain. I lost count of the shades at fifty...

There was a session in full swing in Peppers Bar, fiddlers Martin Hayes and Mark Donnellon, local box player Seamus Bugler and guitarist Dennis Cahill. East Clare music, lyrical with a swing, the boys were back in town. Tunes in minor keys, tunes by Cooley, Fahey and Canny. It was like finding a well spring for the soul.

After the session finished there was the chat and the catch up. Accordion player Andrew MacNamara arrived, just back from a tour of Australia with guitarist Brendan Herrity. Stories are related, experiences parlayed. We discussed boomerangs and the size of kangeroos... Jim Corry, the Tulla piano man enters the company, he's back from a week in Spain with the Swallow's Tail Ceili Band. He apologised for his tan: in these stricken times, not many can afford a tan. Jim is excused and has a pint of beer before getting ready for a gig with the Tulla Ceili Band in the tent behind the pub.



*The Tulla in Ennistymon, 2006*

A photographer comes to the table as Martin Hayes, Mark Donnellon and myself are finishing dinner & discussing the state of the nation. He's from a local publication and needs a photo of the lads... Instruments are taken out of cases for the shoot and a session begins... a few more musicians join, evening sun shines through the window and there's a golden glow in Feakle. A well known business man comes in with Rayban shades on his head and tiger trappings around neck... he does a bit of glad handling and back slapping and a wizened man with a pint and a cap mutters, "Will someone tell that shaggin' idiot that the boom is over..."

Mark and Martin stop playing after an hour or so, take a break before going on stage with the Tulla for the ceili. Andrew Mac takes out his box in the bar, twirls a few notes and like bird call, a flock of musicians join him. His side-kick Brendan Herrity twangs the guitar and the energy amps up. Dance music rocks the bar and a group of locals hit the floor for a half-set. Mac is in his element, driving his box like a man in control of a rocket heading for the moon.



*High voltage music from Andrew MacNamara in Feakle, May 2009*

Sometime later a Cajun box player comes in from Seattle— he's a fan of Andrew's and he joins the session. Cajun two-steps, songs in French, we all play along. Music is music, it all comes from the heart and soul. A Japanese violinist joins and amazes everyone with her playing of East Clare reels. Mac smiles broadly when a man known as 'The Waneling' tries to sing a song called 'Johnny on the Mountain'. It's a magical night in Feakle, a fitting memorial to PJ Hayes, the quiet man who guided us all here with his music.

Up the Banner.

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**Eddie Stack** is a writer from Ennistymon, County Clare and no stranger to Aughty country. An American Small Press of the Year Award recipient, he also received a Top 100 Irish American Award in response to his first book of short fiction, *The West: Stories from Ireland*.

His work is included in several anthologies and he has been published in various literary reviews including *Fiction*, *Confrontation*, *Whispers & Shouts* and *Criterion 83* and *Crannog*. A CD of four stories from *The West* read by the Eddie Stack, with music by Martin Hayes and Dennis Cahill was released in summer 2002. He published a second collection of stories, *Out of the Blue*, in Spring 2004. He recently won the Caomhnú Award for short fiction and his novel *Heads* is due to be published later this year. In April 2009 he launched a blog titled *Onwards* which is widely read.

Eddie Stack was co-founder and artistic director of the Irish Arts Foundation in San Francisco. He was a member of the Irish trad group *Last Night's Fun* with Tommy Peoples, Paddy Keenan, Johnny Moynihan and the late Shane Holden. He is currently working on a

book about the culture and traditional arts of Doolin, County Clare. Due out in 2010, the book includes interviews with Micho Russell and Paddy Shannon as well as profiles on the Russell and Killoughery brothers. It has features on storytelling, dancing as well as music and songs from Doolin.

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